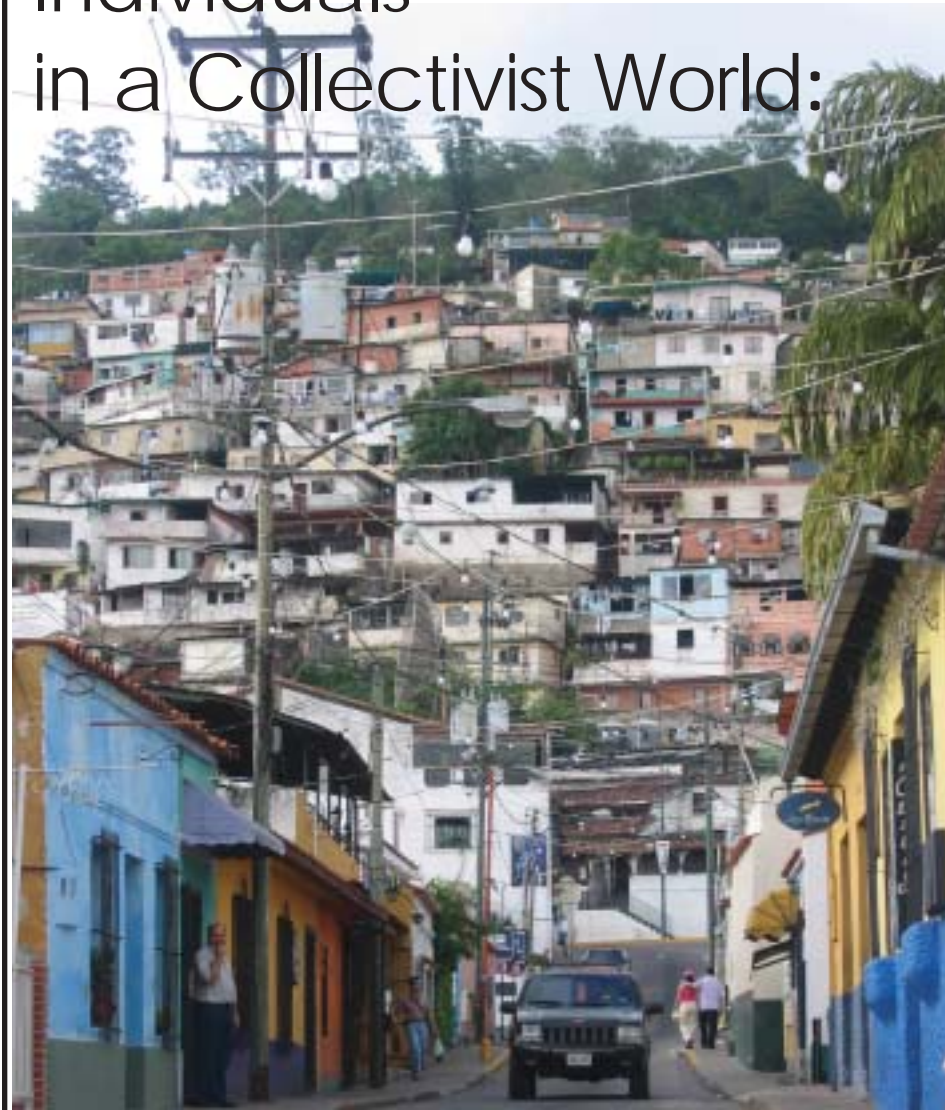


Individuals in a Collectivist World:

Born in the U.S.A., Teaching in Caracas, Venezuela

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Two U.S.A.-born American professors of education reflect on lessons in family and community gleaned while teaching graduate courses to teachers in one of South America's capitol cities:

How does traffic flow smoothly in a city of 6 million people with very few traffic control signals and a minimum of honking and almost no accidents?

What accounts for the juxtaposition of modern skyscrapers against mountains of patchwork high-rise shanties?

Why is everything so quiet on Sundays?

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Demographics

Venezuela is a country slightly larger than twice the size of California, the third largest U.S.A. state in land area.¹ Caracas, the capitol city, is home to a population of 6 million people² nested into a space that is actually smaller in size than the area of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A., a city/suburb of only 2.8 million people.³

The name *Venezuela*, meaning "Little Venice," originated with the Amerindian stilt villages which the Spanish explorers encountered in the Orinoco River. The view reminded them of Venice, Italy. Today, stilt-supported shanties continue to climb out of the valleys and up the mountains that define Caracas, Venezuela. Stacked precariously on top of each other, the impoverished dwellings, still lacking running water and electricity in areas, provide stark contrast to the skyscrapers and high rises of the

business center. The Gross National Income per capita of \$3,490 compares favorably with Columbia's \$1,810, but stands in stark contrast to \$37,610 in the United States.⁴

Venezuela's population is 25,375,281, of which 85% live in urban areas. The country's diverse ethnic groups include Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Arab, German, African, and indigenous peoples. Approximately 67% of the population are Mestizo (of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood),⁵ 21% are of European descent, 10% of African descent, and 2% indigenous. Approximately 200,000 Amerindians, remnants of a number of diverse semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer societies, remain. Spanish is the official language, but more than 30 Amerindian languages still survive, predominantly belonging to the Arawak, Cariban, and Chibcha ethnolinguistic categories. The country is predominantly Roman Catholic, accounting for 96% of

the population, with approximately 2% Protestant.⁶

Individualism and Collectivism as Cultural Scripts

Greenfield (1994) discusses the issues surrounding individualism and collectivism as cultural scripts contrasting American European and Western European cultures as more individualistic compared to African, Asian, Latin American, and Native American (indigenous). Greenfield contrasts “the dimension of an individualistic, private, or independent orientation (Western) versus a collective, social, or interdependent orientation (Africa, Asia, Latin America)” (p. xv).

Greenfield clearly articulates how schools in individualistic societies, particularly the United States, are structured around competitive models that foster individualism at the expense of cooperation, supporting independence over community.

Triandis (1989) contends approximately 70% of the world’s cultures are collectivistic as compared to individualistic. The Latin, collectivist culture of Venezuela is one of the primary factors contributing to answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this article. In a collectivist culture people

are more comfortable with close proximity, according to Trumbull et al (2001).

Key elements of collectivism include a focus on interdependent relations, cooperation, and group well being, stressing the importance of family, organizations, religious, and social relationships. Space is shared, and close proxemics and contact characterize life in a collectivist society.

In contrast, key elements of an individualistic orientation, according to Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2001), are individual fulfillment, competition, and independent relations stressing the importance of self, individual success, task accomplishment, and the importance of physical objects and their acquisition. In such independent cultures, space is an issue of privacy and walls are commonly used to designate the property lines in an individualistic society.

In Caracas, an unbelievable amount of traffic moves with few traffic accidents and without the benefit of many traffic lights or stop signs. A consistent jerky jockeying for space punctuates the streets. Unsigned, unspoken rules govern the constant merging of traffic. We watched in amazement as people merged and allowed others to do so with only inches to spare, whereas in an individualistic culture there would

undoubtedly be a multitude of traffic accidents without traffic control devices.

In cities in the United States, even with traffic controls, there are numerous accidents. The lack of accidents and traffic control devices in Caracas may be accounted for in part by the fact that in collectivist cultures people tend to be more socially aware and conscious of proximity (Ho, 1994). The image of Caracas traffic recalls other collectivist cultures in major world cities where people on and in bicycles, *xich lôs*, mopeds, taxis, and delivery trucks fluidly negotiate movement (see Huber’s description of Ho Chi Minh City in “Remembrance of Vietnam as Memorial Kinship”).

Contrasting School Cultures— Considering Collectivist and Individualistic Cultures

From their earliest foundation, American *common schools*, now called *public schools*, in the United States have been structured around an individualistic model (Miller, 1990; Spring, 2005) that encourages individualism, fosters competition, and supports capitalism (Kliebard, 1987, pp. 90-91). As a result of this orientation, major differences exist between schools in the U.S.A., with this individualistic



macroculture, and schools in Venezuela, a predominantly collectivist culture.

Differences can be identified in many areas, with the following dimensions particularly of interest to educators: learning environments; decision-making styles; and interactional styles—students, family members, and teachers.

Learning Environments

In an individualistic culture students are usually encouraged to learn by listening, become self-reliant, become competitive, and pursue academic achievement. In this environment learners are taught that academic intelligence is important above other types of intelligence. Compare this with the emphasis of learning environments in a collectivist culture where students are encouraged to learn through participation and interaction, utilize the skills of the group, value cooperation, and foster a combined sense of social and academic achievement. In this type of an environment learners are taught that social intelligence is important as well as other types of intelligence.

Students and teachers are much more comfortable operating through cooperative modes of learning, sharing, and discussion to build consensus for understanding in a collectivist society. Students and teachers whose primary orientation and style are more individualistic will prefer individual ownership, working alone, and voting as a means of decision-making.

Decision Making Styles

Building consensus is seen as one of the most desirable traits for an individual to possess in a collectivist culture. Turn-taking may not be readily apparent to



the untrained observer, as groups tend to monitor themselves much more effectively in that regard. In an individualistic culture students most often prefer voting when decisions involving the group are to be made and are generally not good at monitoring themselves as a few of the more vocal students will seek to control most of the discussion without regard for others.

An illustration of the contrast between the two orientations in decision making occurred one afternoon when the teachers with whom we were working in Caracas decided to send out for lunch. The discussion involved the selection of pizza from a local restaurant. But the native Venezuelan who was placing the call for his colleagues returned to report that the pizza could not be delivered during the desired time frame.

One of the ex pats (in this case, a U.S.A. American who teaches internationally) sug-

gested another pizza shop. But the suggestion was clearly unacceptable to one of the teachers (a native Texan with Colombian heritage) who said that she would rather have Thai take-out if the original pizza was not available. The teacher trying to coordinate the effort was clearly concerned that one of the group was not happy with the switch to another pizza. The ex pat, on the other hand, shrugged the situation off with the explanation that more people wanted pizza and they should stick with their original vote, even though the vote had been for a different source.

We watched with interest (reserving any comments that would interfere with their process) as the group, particularly the person designated to place the order, worked to resolve the differences. Clearly, several students (all ex pats) believed the pizza should be the choice because that was the original consensus. Also obvious, though, was the effort of the local Venezuelan teacher to convince each member of the group to hear the other comments and find a new consensus. Ultimately, Thai take-out was delivered for lunch.

Interactional Styles— Students, Family Members, and Teachers

In a study of immigrant Latino families in the U.S.A., Valdés (2003) found that

mothers saw themselves as participating actively in their children's *educación*, that is, in raising children to be good and well-behaved human beings. They did not, however, see themselves as adjunct school teachers. They did not see their role as involving the teaching of school subjects. In their own experience in school, this had been the province of the teacher. (p. 166)



The different perspectives on who teaches and the role parents/guardians/family play is an ongoing concern in educational settings. As Joseph Suina admonishes in his representation of issues for traditional Pueblo children moving from an interdependent natal culture to school culture to dominant society culture: "Teaching and learning in the more traditional Pueblos remain in the hands of *all Pueblo members* [emphasis added], in contrast to formalized American schooling where education is the province of *experts*" (Suina & Smolkin, 1994, p. 117).

Other potential sources of conflict, according to Quiroz and Greenfield (1996), include the belief in an individualistic culture that the child is seen as more of an individual deserving of independence, praise for task accomplishment, and having more developed cognitive rather than social skills. In contrast, in a collectivist culture, according to Quiroz and Greenfield (1996), children are seen as a part of the group, rewarded for helpfulness, criticized if they do not fall within the norms of the

group, and prized for their social skills. Overall, the traditional emphasis of indigenous cultures is typically more collectivist, a factor often not recognized by teachers coming from individualistic cultures.

Suina poignantly emphasizes the awareness of proper contextualization and tradition in interdependent cultures in relaying his own story of turning to his father to learn the appropriate wholistic context for a ceremony to be performed in his Pueblo village. The intergenerational interdependence and respect for tradition is emphasized in his story, as is the obvious contradiction for Pueblo students who attend schools and work in a larger society that privileges book learning over tradition, and the written word over orality literacy (See Suina & Smolkin, 1994, pp. 118-119).

Families are the center of activity in collectivist cultures. Two examples from our recent teaching in Caracas highlight this characteristic. On Father's Day, which was a Sunday, even though the malls were open, most people attended church and, in

the afternoon, every restaurant was filled with families celebrating the day. Very few people were shopping in the malls.

On June 24, The Battle of Carabobo Day and Army Day, a national holiday, all shopping malls were closed as were most restaurants. The few restaurants that were open were sparsely populated and the few customers there were families. When we talked with teachers and staff, they reported sharing the day in gatherings of extended family members. This is unlike the activities on similar holidays in the individualistic culture in the United States, where the shopping malls are open and highly populated, and *family* is often defined in smaller units.

In another example of interdependent, collectivist cultural scripts, one of the teachers with whom we worked in Caracas wrote:

My husband and my son are in Spain, and Gaby (my daughter) and I will join them in Madrid airport to go to Italy. I am still in Caracas waiting for Gaby, she is in her final [college] exams. (Marycarmen, personal communication, July 11, 2005)

That she would depart without her daughter, leaving her to travel alone, is not part of her cultural script.

Ultimately, the stark difference between independent and interdependent cultures is seen in the interactions with elderly parents. As a hotel restaurant manager shared with us, he had worked in Australia for six years and was much happier there, but his parents had reached an age where they needed assistance, so he returned to take care of them. He gently suggested that such was not the way in the United States.

As one of the teachers shared, her sister had moved to the U.S.A., married and stayed in the States to raise her family, distancing herself from the extended family in Caracas. Revi was now left to take care of her ailing mother. She asked if that would be an issue in the U.S.A. Her impression from film and media was that we simply arranged for assisted living or placement in retirement homes—an option she explained was unconscionable to the Venezuelan lifestyle.

The Politics of Education

Perhaps one of the most recent testimonies to the value placed on collectivist culture in Venezuelan schools is found in the following coverage of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's comments and actions in May-June 2005.

Revolution, suggests radical educator Paulo Freire, is "the ultimate teacher ...



giving first place to the indispensable role of education in the process of forming the New Woman and the New Man.” Although Freire wrote these words almost 30 years ago, in his preface to Jonathan Kozol’s book *Children of the Revolution*, he could have been writing about Venezuela today.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez devoted a May 15 call-in television program to education. Attending the inauguration of a new high school, he presented a “new educational model for a new citizen.” Competition and individualism in schools, he said, must give way to unity, brotherhood, and solidarity. “We are all a team, going along eliminating little by little the values or the anti-values that capitalism has planted in us from childhood.”⁷

Though military coups, bloody mass protests, and the August 2004 referendum have threatened Chavez’s presidency, his attack on poverty through seven projects known as missions has featured education as the cornerstone, aiming to reduce illiteracy and high school drop-out rates. A literacy rate of 93% with primary school attendance at 94% and secondary at 69% compares favorably with other nations.⁸

As the *New Internationalist* reported in a June 2005 “Country Profile” of Venezuela:

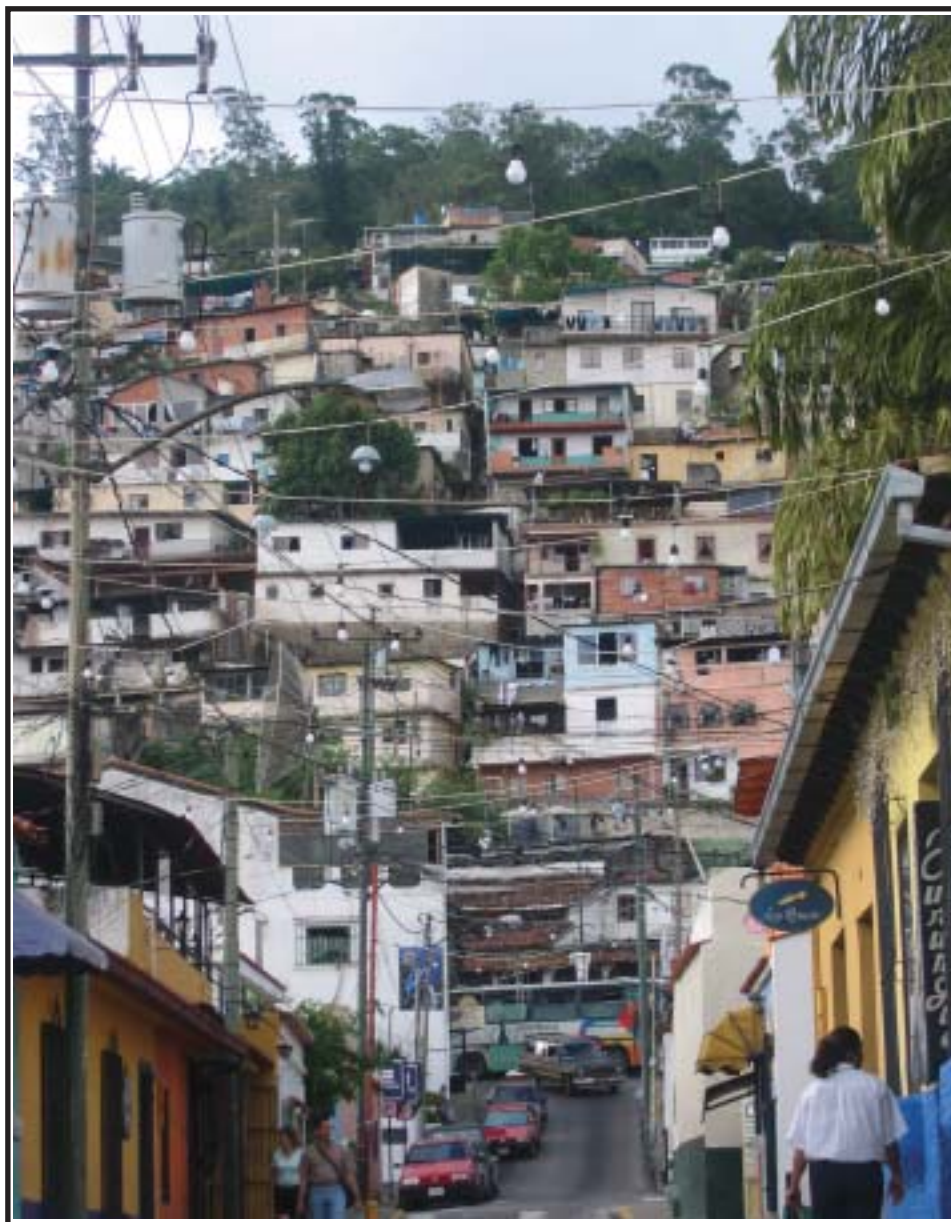
The driving force behind the missions are the legions of Cuban teachers and doctors shipped in to train teachers and care for the sick in hilltop slums in exchange for cheaper barrels of oil for Cuba.⁹

When Fidel Castro visited Caracas during the celebration and parade for The Battle of Carabobo Day and Army Day, we were advised by the teachers to stay away from the large military gathering because of anti-American sentiment and violence during recent parades and military gatherings. *El Universal* (June 25, 2005, pp. 1, 2, 4) reported 3,686 military representatives participated. The show of tanks and weaponry was massive.

Choosing Community over Contradiction

It is important to remember that in a collectivist culture or society there will be individuals whose preferred style is individualistic and in an individualistic culture there will be individuals whose preferred style is collectivist. According to Ho (1994), “There is no necessary contradiction for a person to hold individualistic and collectivist views at the same time” (pp. 304-305).

Thus, it is not our intent to stereotype or generalize about Caracas, but to add a layer of information that will provide cues



as to why people from some cultures operate the way they do in schools and society. Beyer (1998) clearly indicates “if we are to challenge and replace the...emphasis on individualism...we must revive a sense of community...” (p. 256). The choice is ours.

Notes

¹ California covers 155,959 square miles, with an estimated population of 35,484,453 in 2003. U.S. Census Bureau State and County Quickfacts: California Quickfacts. Accessed August 12, 2005, from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/0600.html>

² The population may be as high as 7 million since there are undercounts of individuals based on the rapid influx of people. Accessed June 25, 2005, from http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/D/De/Demographics_of_Venezuela.htm and <http://www.maclester.edu/geography/courses/geog261/APaz/Demographics&Religion.htm>

³ Profile of General Demographics Characteristics, 2000. Accessed July 16, 2005, from <http://govpubs.lib.umn.edu/census/profile.phtml>

⁴ New Internationalist. (2005, June). Country profile: Venezuela. *New Internationalist*, 379, 36.

⁵ The Mestizo-Mexicano-Indian History, Accessed July 1, 2005, from <http://www.sonic.net/~doret/ArchiveARCHIVE/NATIVE%20AMERICAN/TheMestizo-Mexicano-Indi.html>

⁶ Accessed June 25, 2005, from http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/D/De/Demographics_of_Venezuela.htm

⁷ Whitney, W. T., Jr. (2005). Education gets huge boost in Venezuela. *People's Weekly World Newspaper* 06/23/05. Accessed June 25, 2005, from <http://www.pwww.org/article/articleprint/7279/>

⁸ New Internationalist. (2005, June). Country profile: Venezuela. *New Internationalist*, 379, 36.

⁹ Ibid.

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